How'd This Guy

Photo composition by Yvonne Dawson

by Cdr. Andrew J. Barton

Because I'm the last person in this story still on active duty, it's up to me to tell this tale in the hope of preventing a mishap in one of your squadrons. Almost 10 years ago, I was a senior lieutenant in my first fleet P-3 squadron. I had spent six years in submarines before flight school, so although I was not a seasoned aviator, I was an experienced officer.

After my first deployment to Adak, my JO PPC was replaced with a new O-4 PPC with quite a few flight hours. The first indication that something was wrong with our new PPC was on a routine ASW training mission to the SOCAL operating area. On taxi for takeoff, the FE did a routine lights check and discovered that both prop pump 1 light bulbs on the No. 3 engine were out. The PPC elected to replace the bulbs before takeoff, and the flight station concurred.

In an effort to take off on time, however, the PPC failed to ask tower for a delay. When we arrived at the hold-short, we were cleared for takeoff. The PPC rogered and told the 2P to continue onto the runway while he and the FE struggled to get the bulb back in the panel. The other cockpit crew all recommended that we hold to finish this maintenance before taking the runway. The PPC insisted we continue so we would not be late for takeoff.

That's when he first uttered the immortal words that would haunt the crew for the next year, "I'm the PPC, and I'm in charge." He ordered the 2P to take off, and while we rocketed down the runway, the PPC continued shoving the light bracket back into its socket.

From my seat on the radar cabinet, I knew this bizarre sight directly conflicted with everything I had been taught.

The flight down to SOCAL went fine—until about six hours into the mission. The PPC was still in the seat, having never taken a break. He had stayed in his seat so we would not have to climb above 1,000 feet for a seat swap.

Instead, he thought it would be safer to urinate in a Gatorade bottle while strapped in his seat. I made a mental note to talk about this technique with some of the instruc-

Get His Wings?


Ted Calson

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tors when we got back. The MO (a former FRS instructor pilot) agreed that the flight was out of the norm and said he'd talk to our PPC about his headwork.

A few weeks later, our crew was scheduled for a torpedo exercise on the Nanoose Range in British Columbia. This range is in the straits between Vancouver Island and mainland Canada. Very tall mountains surround the range, but you have enough room to maneuver safely if you are VMC.

We loaded our torps at Whidbey Island and were in the middle of our brief when the briefer told us the range was clobbered: 300-foot ceilings and one half-mile visibility in fog. The wind was blowing hard and the sea state was so high that the launch-and-recovery crew would not be able to recover the torps. Polar Tanker, the range conductor, told the PPC that he was going to scrub the mission.

Again, our fearless PPC decided to launch anyway so as not to affect our qualification progress or have to repeat the flight to get the "X." The 2P and I both insisted that going to the range was foolish in this weather and recommended aborting. He placated us with, "Let's just take a look. If it's IMC, we'll return, but it won't hurt to look." So off we went.

Fifteen minutes later, we were holding IMC in Vancouver's ILS corridor, looking for a VMC hole to descend to the range. The PPC announced, "I see a hole. Chop VFR now." He rolled the aircraft into a 45-degree bank and chopped the power. The 2P said, "This is not VFR, and I'm not going to cancel. Are you nuts?" The PPC again uttered those immortal words, "I'm the PPC, I'm the mission commander. Chop VFR now!"

We descended IMC, passed through 1,000 feet AGL at 3,000 fpm, 45 degrees AOB, and rolled out at 300 feet, just under the ceiling with one-half-mile visibility–just as a floatplane flew by our nose. We were forced to maintain a 30-degree AOB turn to avoid flying over terrain and stay in the half-mile VFR hole the PPC had found.

We couldn't raise Polar Tanker because he had gone home (no surprise to the rest of us). No joy with Vancouver Radio or approach to get an IFR clearance out of our dilemma. No answers on any frequencies or guard because we were low and surrounded by invisible mountains. MOSA (minimum operational safe altitude) was totally busted. The radar operator was giving constant terrain calls and screaming for a climb. All flight-station personnel were yelling at the PPC to get us out of there and climb.

To make matters worse, our VFR hole was drifting toward vacation homes built on a cliff 100 to 150 feet off

the water. Do the math: an aircraft at 300 feet AGL flying over 50-foot-high homes on a 150-foot cliff. We were flying about 100 feet over the roofs of these homes as we constantly turned in our VFR hole.

The PPC had his hands full keeping the plane VMC and out of the water and couldn't make any decisions. The entire crew (except Sensor 3, who was sweating bullets making MOSA calls) was in the flight station. All 11 of us were screaming at the PPC to get us out of there and climb on the emergency safe heading. The 2P finally took the controls and began an immediate climb.

When we regained radio contact, we were at 8,000 feet, right in the middle of Vancouver International's approach corridor. Vancouver Approach was not happy but vectored us home.

I fully expected a flight violation, but nothing ever came of it. When we got back on deck, several crew members immediately beat feet to the skipper's office to relate our story and ask to be removed from the crew so that they never had to fly with our 0-4 PPC again. The 2P, TACCO and I also talked to the CO and explained what had happened. He said that he would talk to the PPC about this incident. But as far as we could determine, nothing changed.

Our fearless PPC deployed with us and managed to fly some of the most poorly conducted missions in VP history. A few highlights include:

• Overriding a waveoff call from the 2P and FE, touching down at the 5-board on an 11,500-foot runway, and stopping the aircraft just a few feet short of the grass.

• Ignoring the battle-group operations officer's orders to clear a warning area and RTB, and flying into the middle of a South Korean live-fire exercise.

• Listening to three radios at the same time and ignoring his crew for 90 minutes during a three-submarine ASW exercise.

• Flying into a typhoon to search for a Soviet Foxtrot submarine transiting on the surface to Vietnam. I tried in vain to convince our PPC that no submarine skipper in the world would be on the surface during a typhoon. The next day, on my first mission-commander flight, I found the Foxtrot 250 miles south of his search pattern, underway to Cam Rahn Bay in smooth seas.

After each of these flights, I talked to the CO and XO about our 0-4 PPC and asked that something be done to correct his lack of common sense, aircrew coordination and headwork. The answer every time was, "We'll talk to him about it." There was never any improvement. Fortunately, our squadron was decommissioned after deployment, and because of some major personal problems, our infamous PPC was transferred out of the squadron and never flew a Navy aircraft again.

Senior officers in a squadron must pay attention to signs that something is amiss. Identifying a failing naval aviator is not easy. The signs of a problem can be subtle, and disaster can strike seemingly without warning. Failing naval aviators don't wear signs around their neck or have big, red warnings in their NATOPS jacket. The warning signs are there, however, and they were definitely there for this squadron CO and XO. The human-factors council failed to identify the many personal problems with which our PPC was dealing.

If we'd had a mishap, the CO and XO would not have had any excuse for their failure to ground this PPC, conduct a human-factors board and possibly a FNAEB. Human-factors boards are time-consuming and sometimes very emotional. No one likes to probe into the personal lives of friends and colleagues to get at the root of problems. Face it, it is hard to make the tough decision and ground a fellow aviator. However, that's why we are paid the big bucks, and the junior aviators below us and the chain of command above us expect us to make the tough calls.

To this day, I struggle with my part in this failure of leadership. My experience in nuclear submarines taught me to follow instructions and orders verbatim. Decisions were black and white. It took me some time to learn to stand up for my crew and myself and do what was right. To the JOs out there, learn from my mistake. Be forceful and stand up for what is right. To skippers and future skippers, pay attention to the signs that something is amiss. Pull that loose string–you may be unraveling a future death shroud.

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